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'The Duchess' Looks Back

Long-Time Chicago Newspaperwoman
Recalls Highlights Of Her Career

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Virginia "The Duchess" Marmaduke hobnobbed with presidents, royalty, actors and cops during her newspaper and broadcasting career in Chicago.

Globe-Democrat Photo by Paul Ockrassa

'The Duchess' Looks Back

By Patricia Szymczak



She was a "news hen," a "girl reporter" who chronicled human history in a journalistic age of kings that crowned her "The Duchess."

In 1943, the world was at war when Virginia Marmaduke, 35 and just divorced, left the Herrin Daily Journal and the hills of Southern Illinois for the lakeside city room of the Chicago Sun.

It was the beginning of a career that saw the Sun become the Sun-Times, bridged the early days of TV and later found The Duchess' byline on the pages of the rival Chicago Tribune.

Dwight D. Eisenhower was "the sexiest" of Presidents, she asserts now as she looks back at the age of 74 and, with great affection, remembers the late Mayor Richard J. Daley as a great and honest pol.

Miss Marmaduke rode elephants and camels in the circus, dated the late actor George Raft, attended the national conventions of both the Republicans and the Democrats from 1944 to 1962 and, during their tour of Chicago in 1956, interviewed Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip of England.

She also was the only "pencil and paper man" in the North Side Chicago alley when, on a shocking night in 1946, detectives on the Suzanne Degnan case lifted the kidnapped six-year-old's severed head from a sewer.

Remembered by her male colleagues as a newsman who always knew how to be a lady, Virginia "The Duchess" Marmaduke, was named Chicago Press Veteran of the Year in 1979, the only woman ever to be so honored.

"I guess I'm lucky in that I loved what I did," she says now from an easy chair in the living room of her two-bedroom apartment in Pinckneyville, Ill., 300 miles south of the Windy City

Long-Time Chicago Newspaperwoman Recalls Highlights Of Her Career

In 1979, Chicago's Mayor Jane Byrne presented Miss Marmaduke with the Chicago Press Veteran of the Year award. She was the first woman to win the award.

Photo Ideas, Inc. Photo

where so many of her fondest memories lie.

"I never saw a job for which I would have traded," she said. "There was always something going on in the racket. I decided to retire when I was 57. I looked around and saw my bosses were younger than I, and knew it was time to get out."

The Duchess was born June 21, 1908 in Carbondale, Ill., an only child and descendant of Missouri governors Meredith M. Marmaduke and John S. Marmaduke, who served from 1844-48 and 1884-92, respectively.

Her parents moved to Chicago when she was nine and lived in an apartment on the city's then elegant South Lake Shore at 71th and Jeffrey Streets, near the South Shore Country Club.

Her father, the late Harvey C. Marmaduke, had risen from messenger boy to special assistant to the president of the Illinois Central Railroad. "He had the same drive I did," she remarked.

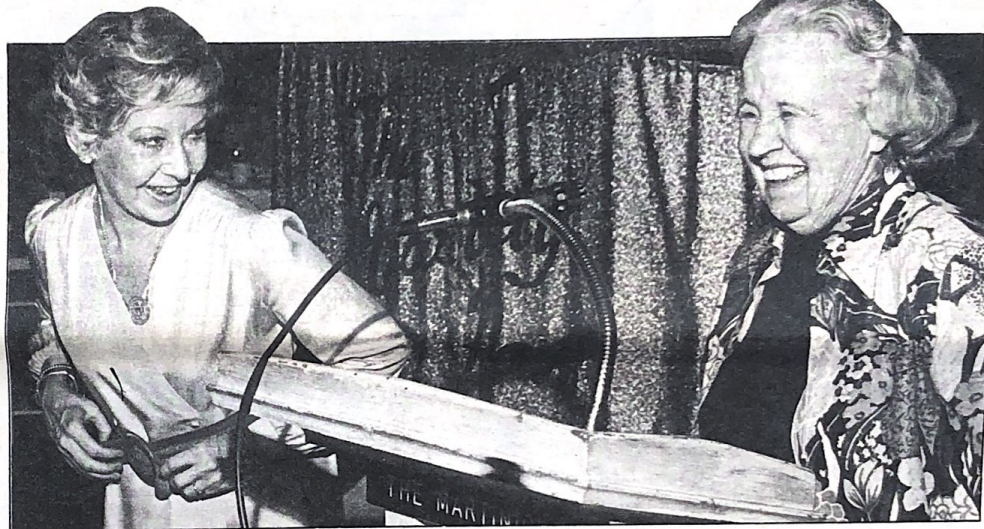
Miss Marmaduke graduated from high school in 1927, from Ursuline Academy in Arcadia, Mo., where a boarding school education by strict Roman Catholic nuns who emphasized language skills "gave me the self-assurance to sit down and write," she said.

The Ursuline sisters closed the southeast Missouri school in 1971. It is now only a convent.

Two years of secular education at Hyde Park High School in Chicago preceded the move south. Miss Marmaduke's subsequent college career included another year of Catholic education at Fontbonne College in St. Louis and two years at the University of Iowa in Iowa City where she worked on the school newspaper.

"My father was a Methodist; my mother was nothing. I joined the Presbyterian Church in Chicago when I was 10 because of my friends," she said. "I'm an elder now in the First Presbyterian Church here."

"But at heart I'm no more a



Presbyterian or a Catholic than I am a Republican or a Democrat. I can sing a Requiem Mass. Most people I meet here in this Bible Belt are Baptist.

"The effort to be an objective journalist broadens your life into feeling no provincialism. Man or woman, there's no difference in the way we were born. It's the way we use what we were born with," she added.

"Chicago and downstate, I understand both sides and see the problems. I'm a citizen of Illinois. People here (Southern Illinois) don't know what it's like to have to get on a bus and pay \$1 to travel three blocks. People from Chicago think the world stops at the city limits.

"I wrote an article once for Illinois tourism which talked about a great state from the ski jumps at Carey to the cotton fields of Cairo with agriculture, coal and oil in between and the second largest city in the country as its crowning jewel. What other state can claim all these things at once?" she summed up proudly.

Miss Marmaduke was married once, to the late Harold E. Grear whom she met at the University of Iowa when he visited there with the University of Missouri golf team. They were wed in 1930 and moved to Herrin, his home town of 10,000 where for the next 13 years "I did everything from sweeping the floor to covering the city council" at the Herrin Daily Journal, the family business, she said.

The Southern Illinoian eventually bought the 3,000 circulation Journal.

"I probably would have never left. But my husband found another woman while in Washington D.C. during the war, so I decided to move back with my parents in Chicago," Miss Marmaduke reported.

"I went to the Daily News first. They said, don't call us, we'll call you. The Sun wanted to know when I could start. I was lucky. All the good men were in the war and I had the experience.

"I was there three or four days and the city editor called me over to his desk," she said. "Ninety men in the office and they were all watching the new babe. He said, 'Marmaduke, that's a hell of a name, belongs on the society page. You're going to be covering blood, guts and sex, and not necessarily in that order. There's a duke at the end of it, so we'll make you a duchess.'

"From then on, I was 'The Duchess' to everyone from the mayor to the copyboys," she said.

The Sun had only one "girl reporter" on general assignment at the time.

Rita Fitzpatrick was her counterpart at the Chicago Tribune.

Her sex. Was it ever an advantage? "Not the way you might be thinking," she replied. "But, a female smile can open more doors than a \$10 bill."

After her newspaper received a tip one day, Miss Marmaduke was

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"The Duchess"

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assigned to go to a union hall where a murder had taken place. She arrived, along with several male colleagues from other papers, before the police got there. When the police did arrive, they locked up the reporters until any evidence could be gathered and photographs taken.

Miss Marmaduke feigned nausea and tricked the police guard into letting her use "the ladies room" from where she telephoned her office with a story that beat the competition.

She recalls the arrest of 17-year-old University of Chicago student William G. Heirens for the Degnan abduction, murder and dismemberment as the most memorable of her many assignments.

"I must have interviewed 600 to 700 people," she said of her probe of the murder billed as the "Crime that Shocked Chicago." "And I made crime pay."

Using the byline, V. Crain Marmaduke, "because they wouldn't have a woman writer," she said, The Duchess earned \$1,500 in selling the story to the nationally circulated Bernarr Macfadden's Detective Magazine.

She had been the only reporter patrolling with detectives the night the 6-year-old's head was found. Heirens pleaded guilty to the killing and two other murders, and at age 56 is still imprisoned at the Vienna (Ill.) Correctional Center.

"The men respected you for being one of them and turning in a good job," Miss Marmaduke observed. "The greatest compliment was when my fellow reporters called me a good newspaperman. To be called a good newspaperwoman meant I wasn't."

On a lighter note, it was the Duchess who presided over a pink satin ribbon cutting ceremony when Sun-Times management in 1948 gave in to her pleas and installed the first women's restroom in the city room, saving women reporters there a walk up two flights of stairs to the restroom in the society section.

She wrote the lovelorn column for the Sun-Times once for a month and in 1953 was on the television show, "This is Your Life," as "the typical American newspaperwoman." In the early 1960s, she appeared in silhouette on local Chicago television station WGN, giving advice again to the lovelorn under the alias Ruth Jamieson.

With an offer of more money, she began writing features for the Chicago Tribune in 1956, only to switch two years later to radio and television broadcasting, first at the NBC affiliate and then ABC. The WGN stint followed.

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In the mid-1950s, Miss Marmaduke switched from being a newspaper reporter to radio broadcasting and later, television.



Top: For a while, the Duchess — as she was dubbed by her first city editor — dated the late movie actor George Raft.

Above: As a newspaperwoman, she rode elephants and camels in various circuses to get stories.

Left: In 1953, Miss Marmaduke was honored as "a typical American newspaperwoman" on Ralph Edwards' TV show, "This Is Your Life." Here, she is hugged by her father, the late Harvey C. Marmaduke of Chicago.





Fortunately, Miss Marmaduke also could ride a horse for she spent one day as a mounted policeman, again in the line of her newspaper duties.

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“I’ll always be a pencil and paper reporter, though,” she confessed. “The world didn’t move as fast then. We had to make people feel by what we put on paper.”

Are newspapers in trouble?

“Of course not,” she answered. “Who can drag a TV screen with them to the bathroom? There are enough thinking people around who are going to always say, I don’t know enough about this issue.”

Republican Gov. Richard Ogilvie sent Miss Marmaduke east in 1964 to coordinate events at the Illinois “Land of Lincoln” Pavilion at the New York World’s Fair.

It was her second political appointment. Democratic Boss Richard Daley had made her the first woman member of the Chicago Board of Health in 1957.

Five days a week for two years, she sent a “postcard from the fair” over the WGN airwaves in addition to fulfilling her state-appointed duties.

Retiring in 1965 at the fair’s end, she settled 9 miles south of Pinckeyville in a log cabin she had built for herself, her mother, Blanche, and an aunt, Leah McCants, on ground that her great great-grandfather farmed in 1831 with a land grant from President James Monroe.

A year after her mother’s death in 1978 at the age of 93, she took an apartment in town. Mrs. McCants, now 99, lives nearby in a nursing home.

Still the writer, the Duchess busies herself with sending letters to the editors of the Chicago and St. Louis press, working on free-lance public relations projects, and doing volunteer consulting work for Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

Most recently, she was named to a standing committee of the Illinois Bar Association on press and court relations. She also is writing an autobiography, she said.

“You know when you get old, people think you get flaky,” Miss Marmaduke said wryly. “And when I’d say things like, I knew Frank Sinatra or, Ike was the sexiest man I ever met, people would look at me funny. So, I went through what must be 300 pictures I have and came up with 88 that proves it.”

The photos are assembled on a wall in a bedroom and study, a testament to the many chapters that make up a life’s story. A sign printed with the words “Marmaduke’s Brag Wall” hangs above it.

“Sometimes, I wake up at night and wonder if this is all there is and I come in here and look around,” she said. “I remember then that life wasn’t always so dull. It’s a career that gives you something to think about.” □